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Regional Updates

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CYPRUS

In the beginning of March, Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiades made a speech at the 8th Mediterranean Oil and Gas Forum held in Southern Cyprus. In his statement, he expressed his hope that future natural gas discoveries would facilitate peace and stability. He added that, “Cyprus would also play a bridge role between disagreements. In this respect, all countries in the region, including Turkey, will be able to benefit from stabilization and co-operation by respecting the rights of international law and sovereignty.”



On March 3, Turkish Cypriot Leader Mustafa Akıncı stated that both Turkish and Greek sides needed a solution as soon as possible. Unlike Anastasiades, he opined that natural gas could create a tension as well as upcoming presidential elections in Southern Cyprus in 2018. He further indicated that inasmuch as both could be stumbling blocks for negotiations, political equality is the essential principle needed for federation. “We want equality, not grants”, he added.

On March 8, Cyprus Presidential Under-Secretary Fotis Fotiou sent warm messages to Israel. He mentioned that, “the discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean will serve as a catalyst for cooperation and stability that creates a new era in this troubled region.” He also stressed that “Cyprus is an actor who is trying to be a solid bridge between the European Union and Israel.”

Additionally, both Turkish Prime Minister Yıldırım and Vice Prime Minister Türkeş visited Cyprus in separate days. Both support Turkey’s agreement on a two-state federal state. On his visit, Yıldırım indicated with regards to the Cyprus question that, “the solution should be fair and equal; we need to guarantee the safety of all the people living in Cyprus.”

Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Foreign Minister Tahsin Ertuğruloğlu said that “only correcting Enosis resolution” is not enough for the Turkish Cypriot side to return to the negotiating table. He requested that, Anastasiades should apologize to the Turkish Cypriot people. “The Turkish Cypriot people are equal with the Greek Cypriot people; the island of Cyprus is equal,” he added.

On March 13, Head of The European Investment Bank (EIB) Werner Hoyer met with Anastasiades and Espen Barth Eide. They discussed Southern Cyprus and EU economies after a prospective solution. According to the report, it was announced that the EIB would “start to work on the investments and sustainability of the island very soon” by starting to identify vital infrastructure works in both communities. “Economy of Southern Cyprus is getting better but unemployment rate is still high.” Hoyer said.

On March 23, a spokesman for Turkey Foreign Ministry Hüseyin Müftüoğlu said “Greek Cypriots refused to accept Turkish Cypriots as politically equal partners in the island.” He said this in

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response to Anastasiades, who had been “alleged” to have held meetings with certain energy giants in the United States.

Towards the end of March, it was stated that the leaders of Cyprus will meet over dinner since peace talks were abruptly interrupted in February. Espen Barth Eide was set to host a dinner for Anastasiades and Akinci on April 2, in the buffer zone.

REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

EGYPT

On 1 March, Amnesty International urged Egyptian authorities to offer protection to Coptic Christians in North Sinai. They also encouraged authorities to provide vital services including accommodation to hundreds who had been forced to flee their homes. This was after seven people were killed in a series of attacks in February.



On 2 March, Hosni Mubarak, former Egyptian President was acquitted in a retrial on charges of killing protesters during the 2011 uprising. The uprising led to the end of his over two decades reign in Egypt.

Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry met on 6 March with EU Commissioner for Home and Migration Affairs, Dimitris Avramopoulos and the German and Austrian foreign ministers in Brussels. At the meeting, he said that, Egypt would not establish refugee camps for migrants. He added that, “refugees and migrants live freely and enjoy the services provided to Egyptian citizens.”

On 12 March, Russia and Egypt agreed upon the final version of a bilateral aviation security protocol, which aims at resuming direct flights between the two countries. Russian Transport Minister, Maxim Sokolov told journalists at a press conference that, while all issues had been agreed, the Egyptian side had not identified the date and venue for the signing of this agreement. Russia suspended flights with Egypt in October 2015, when a Russian passenger plane crashed in Sinai after taking off from Sharm El-Sheikh. All 224 people on board, mostly Russian nationals, were killed.

On 16 March, Egypt’s President, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi issued a presidential decree establishing a diplomatic mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

At the end of March, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman invited Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi to visit Saudi Arabia as a show of good relations. This was on the sidelines of the Arab Summit in Jordan as the two countries discussed improving relations. The two countries have disagreed over Syria and the transfer of two Red Sea islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia. Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt have contested the fate of two islands, Tiran and Sanafir, in the Red Sea. Additionally, Saudi Arabia halted fuel shipments to Egypt indefinitely after Saudi state oil company Aramco informed Egypt in October 2016.

Finally, the annual Arab League Summit held in Jordan ended with a declaration that focused on ending the Syrian crisis, resolving the Palestinian issue and fighting terror. According to the declaration, Arab countries would continue to seek a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis and continue to support the countries hosting Syrian refugees.

REGIONAL UPDATES: ISRAEL

ISRAEL

On 2 March, Israeli Military Court postponed the jailing of an Israeli soldier. Israeli soldier Elor Azaria was sentenced to 18 months in jail in February for killing a wounded Palestinian who was lying on the ground having already been shot.

On 3 March, Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett said that, “war with Israel would send Lebanon back to the Middle Ages”. He said this after comments made by Lebanese President Michel Aoun on an Egyptian TV Channel that Hezbollah was an integral part of the state. Naftali Bennett asserted that the statement was not a declaration of war, but a warning.

On 7 March, Israeli Parliament approved a bill that forbids granting entry visas or residency rights to foreign nationals who call for economic, cultural or academic boycotts of Israel.

On 10 March, the United States President Donald Trump had a phone call with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Trump invited Abbas to the White House to discuss resuming peace talks. It was the first contact between the two since Trump took Office in January.

On 13 March, a 25 year-old Palestinian, Ibrahim Matar was shot by Israeli police near the Lion’s Gate entrance to Al-Aqsa after he wounded two police officers in a knife attack according to an Israeli police statement.

On 15 March, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ECSWA) published a report titled “Israeli Practices towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid”. The report concluded that, “Israel has established an apartheid regime that dominates the Palestinian people as a whole.” This accusation was drastically rejected by Israel.

United States Ambassador to UN, Nikki Haley blasted the report as an “anti-Israel propaganda” and said “the United States stands with our ally Israel and will continue to oppose biased and anti-Israel actions across the UN system and around the world.” Subsequently, a spokesman for U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres claimed that, the report does not reflect the views of António Guterres

On 17 March, Under Secretary General Rima Khalef, head of ECSWA, resigned from her duty. Ms Khalaf said the UN had pressured her to step down after the publication of its report on Israel comparing its practices towards Palestinians as apartheid on 15 March. The report was later deleted from the UN ESCWA Agency’s website.

On the same day, Israeli fighter jets targeting sites inside Syria came under anti-aircraft missile fire but returned unharmed according to the Israeli army. On the other hand, Syria claimed to have shot down one Israeli aircraft.

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On 20 March, Russia's deputy foreign minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, said Russia had "expressed concern" upon Israeli air attacks, and summoned the Israeli ambassador to explain air raids in Syria.

On 22 March, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israeli forces would continue airstrikes in Syria if they deem it necessary.

On 25 March, Mazen Fuqahaa, one of senior Hamas operatives in Gaza, was assassinated by unknown persons. Hamas has accused Israel of carrying out the assassination.

On 30 March, Israel's Security Cabinet unanimously approved the construction of new settlements in the West Bank. The United Nations however, warned the Israeli government after the approval. According to spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, "the Secretary-General took notice with disappointment and alarm of the decision by Israel to build new settlements".

REGIONAL UPDATES: LEBANON

LEBANON

On 1 March, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchova paid a visit to Beirut for a high-level meeting with Lebanese officials on a national counter-terrorism strategy for the continuation of a Lebanese-EU counter-terrorism dialogue launched in January 2016. “The Lebanese parliament would be able to make law, after the deadlock ends with a compromise for the presidency. Legislation has an important role for a national counter-terrorism strategy” he claimed.



On 5 March, Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants, Gebran Bassil promised Lebanese citizens a new electoral law in the upcoming 2017 elections. He said “Lebanon cannot be built based on the laws of 1960’s.”

On 6 March, Israeli Defence Minister Avidgor Liberman said “Lebanese army is a Hezbollah unit”. He made these comments before the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee. He claimed that the statement of Lebanese President Michel Aoun was provocative. Lebanese President Michel Aoun said in an interview on an Egyptian TV that “Hezbollah’s arm do not contradict with the State and are essential component of the means to Lebanon.”

On 7 March, Lebanese Interior Minister, Nouhad al-Mashnouq said “I see no possibility for an agreement on a new electoral law.”

On 8 March, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs was launched with an official ceremony. Prime Minister Saad Hariri said “Lebanese women’s time had begun.” In Lebanon women represent only 3 percent of the legislative organ. The new ministry aims to correct the imbalance against women with a quota system in parliamentary elections.

On the same day, the Lebanese government after a cabinet meeting appointed General Joseph Aoun as army commander and filled several high-ranking security and judicial posts.

On 15 March, Lebanese parliament approved five new taxes and levies, including a 1 percentage point increase in value added tax. Subsequently on 16 March, hundreds of Lebanese people took to the streets protesting the new bill the increased taxes and levies.

On 20 March, protesters threw bottles at Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri as thousands continued to gather in central Beirut, rallying for the fourth day in a row against tax hikes.

On 25 March, there was a conflict in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh. It left three dead and five injured.

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On 26 March, Lebanon's Ministry of Foreign Affairs appealed to the United Nations to protest a pending bill in the Israeli Knesset that plans to annex maritime borders in dispute with Lebanon. The area in question is believed to be rich in natural resources.

On 28 March, Lebanon Cabinet approved the 2017 state budget. The last budget approved by Cabinet was in 2005.

On 29 March, Lebanese President Michael Aoun called for cooperation and reconciliation across the Arab world during the Arab Summit. "The Arab League, which is the institution that unifies the Arabs, must regain its role and mission in virtue of the principles, objectives and spirit of its charter in order to preserve its member states and to save its people, its sovereignty, its independence and its wealth," Aoun said in his speech at the summit.

REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

LIBYA

On 1 March, clashes between rival militias in Tripoli overshadowed political talks sponsored by Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria in their efforts to bring together Libya's major political forces. Tunisian President Beji Caïd Essebsi has been leading efforts; he indicated that it was expedient to bring all regional powerbrokers on board if one was going to make an initiative. He added that few understand Libya better than its Arab neighbors.



On 2 March, the head of Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), Fayeaz al-Sarraj held talks with Russian officials in Moscow. Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary of Russian President Vladimir Putin said that, "Russia is interested in ensuring that Libya finally becomes a stable state after the external interference which had catastrophic consequences for the Libyan state and future of the Libyan people". Russian officials insist they are not plotting to install General Khalifa Haftar but rather push him and Sarraj towards an agreement. Russian officials further maintained that, the unity government must be broadened, "the reality is that the government in Tripoli controls only part of the country's territory and having rival power centers means the current situation is not sustainable". Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov added that, "only Libyan people can overcome the current crisis".

On 3 March, Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB) took control of Ras Lanuf Airport in Central Libya in addition to Ben Jawad and Nofaliya towns in an attack against Dignity Operation Forces according to the Libya Observer.

On 4 March, forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar recaptured the Ras Lanuf airfield with reinforcement of the area around Ras Lanuf. The GNA later commented that allied forces called the Petroleum Facilities Guard were in control of Es Sider and Ras Lanuf ports.

Meanwhile, the head of UN Missions in Libya, Martin Kobler called on all parties engaged in the fighting at Ras Lanuf and Es Sider oil terminals in eastern Libya to show restraint from fighting in the area.

Armed groups in Libya subsequently signed a ceasefire deal ending the four-day battle for control of the Libyan capital according to the GNA.

On 7 March, the media advisor of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), Fathi Al-Maryami indicated to the Libya News Agency that, Agilah Saleh has informed the High National Elections Commission (HNEC) of his desire to hold parliamentary and presidential elections before February 2018. The statement came after the HoR discredited the Libyan Political Agreement that

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was signed in Skhirat, Morocco in December 2015. The HoR has also suspended participation in any dialogue meetings as a response to defend Benghazi Brigades' operation that saw the Operation Dignity Forces kicked out of most of the oil crescent.

On 24 March, in response to reports that more than 200 people may have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea off Libya's coast, Gauri Van Gulik, Amnesty International's Deputy Europe Director said, "this tragedy on this deadly crossing highlights the shameful failure of European governments to address the global refugee crisis. It is clear that putting up walls and fences is not deterring desperate people from trying to reach safety, it is simply putting more lives in peril and filling the pockets of smugglers."

On 25 March, a Libyan court suspended an agreement struck with Italy that aims to reduce refugee boat crossings across the Mediterranean Sea. The Justice Ministry of the Government of National Accord (GNA) confirmed that, the court was still assessing the issue pending a final judgment.

On 28 March, Europe's second-highest court lifted sanctions on the daughter of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. The court argued that, the change in Libya no longer justified the sanctions placed on Aisha Muammar Mohamed El-Gaddafi. She was subjected to a travel ban by EU governments and a freeze on financial assets. The European Union's General Court had earlier approved the sanctions based on the "closeness of association with the regime." In 2014, the EU amended its sanctions but kept Aisha on the list. After rejections of her requests to be excluded, she sued arguing there was no clear reason why she remained under the restrictions after the death of her father and the fall of his regime. The court lifted the sanctions and ordered the EU to pay the legal costs of the case.

Finally, on migration, over 13,400 people have arrived in Italy this year whilst over 500 people have gone missing attempting to cross the Mediterranean from Libya.

SYRIA

In early March, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution to sanction the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Subsequently, a new UN report submitted by its Commission of Inquiry accused the Syrian government and the Syrian Opposition of war crimes in Aleppo.

Aside these, a central highlight in the month of March was the Astana Talks in Kazakhstan. The Talks occurred on the 14th and 15th of March. In participation were the trilateral actors, Russia,



Turkey and Iran who forged the 30 December 2016 ceasefire agreement in Syria. The ceasefire stands despite concussions. For instance, there have been incidents of government bombing districts with which it has had longstanding truces around Damascus. Prior to the Talks, Syrian rebels had asked for the meeting to be postponed dependent on whether the government follows the rules of a new Russian-brokered ceasefire declared for the period of March 7-20. As a result of the failure to postpone the Talks, Syrian rebels refused to attend the peace talks. The opposition spokesperson Osama Abu Zaid indicated that, “the decision was not to go as a result of Russia continuing its crime in Syria against civilians and its support of the crimes of the Syrian regime.”

The Syrian rebels blame Russia for not putting pressure on its ally, the Syrian government to stop bombarding civilians in rebel-held areas or to adhere to the ceasefire. The peace talks ended without any negotiations taking place.

Prior to the Astana Talks, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura indicated at the end of the fourth Geneva Talks that government and opposition delegations will meet for more “proximity talks”, thus hinting at a fifth round of UN-sponsored talks in Geneva.

On 24 March, there were peace negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition delegations in Geneva. The Talks were without UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. The round of talks focused on governance, constitutional issues, elections, counter-terrorism, security and confidence-building measures, according to UN spokesperson, Alessandra Velluci. De Mistura’s deputy, Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy engaged the parties bilaterally, Velluci added.

On the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, both opposition and government delegation refused to negotiate. The opposition insists he must step down, hence, the government delegation’s refusal to discuss the issue. The Syrian government envoy Bashar al-Jaafari, also accused the opposition of sabotaging the talks. He added that the rebel offensives are “pushing everybody toward a total failure and fiasco in the political and diplomatic process”. The chief opposition

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negotiator Nasr al-Hariri said the government was targeting civilians and insisted that a political solution could not include Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. De Mistura added on the 27 March that no miracles should be expected from this round of talks in Geneva. “I am not expecting miracles, I am not expecting breakthroughs and I am not expecting breakdown, the fact that the two delegations managed to agree on the agenda was a step forward,” he said.

Towards the end of March, Turkey announced that its seven-month Euphrates Shield Operation was over. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said, “Operation Euphrates Shield has been successful and is finished. Any operation following this one will have a different name”. Through the Euphrates Shield Operation, Turkish military were able to push ISIS militants from Jarablus and Al-Bab, two strategic towns near the Turkish border

Global Political Trends Center (GPoT Center) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution established under the auspices of Istanbul Kültür University in 2009.

GPoT Center was founded with the aim to support reconciliation and non-violent solutions to international as well as domestic issues through dialogue. Our mission is to contribute to stability, democratization and peace through organizing multitrack diplomacy meetings, conducting innovative and independent research, and encouraging informed debates in the media on key issues affecting Turkey and the world.

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